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BOOK REVIEW

Alister McGrath *Glimpsing the Divine: The Search for Meaning in the Universe. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002. 123 pp. (Hardback)*

Don Braxton

Glimpsing the Divine offers twelve brief meditations on the human quest for meaning and the ways in which the Christian tradition has sought to respond to that quest. The book is very articulate, non-academic (in the good sense), and lavishly illustrated with beautiful photography. In an engaging style, McGrath, a professor of historical theology at Oxford University, offers the serious spiritual seeker glimpses into the ways in Western civilization have both thematized the human hunger for meaning and has fed its people with spiritual, largely Christian, wisdom. For people at the early stages of religious awareness, this book can serve as a fine introduction to Western spirituality.

Having said this, I am also of two minds about what I think about the book. On the one hand, the book touches the bases on all the principal theological themes of the Christian tradition. His presentation centers on incarnational themes in chapter seven where he presents Jesus as the interpretive key (logos) through which we can finally and adequately situate our wonder and awe before the mystery of the universe. He emphasizes the importance in the Christian tradition of having a "personal relationship" with the divine. In the Christ not only does the natural order of reality receive its definitive interpretation (chapter eight) but also our destiny, individually and as a species, before the great temporal horizon of the future (chapter eleven). Other chapters take up Christian teachings on the fall (chapter nine), the place of doctrine in the faith life (chapter ten), and the context of these Christian themes against the backdrop of Western civilization (chapters one through six). It is an admirable portrait narrated with skill and eloquence.

On the other hand, the book adopts a particular interpretive angle to these themes which a scholar of religion will be sensitive to, even if a novice to theology will not. I would characterize the theological vantage point from which McGrath paints his portrait as a relatively conservative neo-Barthian confessionalism. While there is nothing wrong with that orientation as such, yet honesty should dictate some acknowledgement that this is particular kind of theology and that it serves in this text as the normative location from which he writes. But nowhere does McGrath discuss this. Indeed, he repeatedly refers to "the Christian" view on the subjects he discusses as if Christianity were a

monolithic tradition. Thus, readers can walk away from the text thinking of Christianity as a set of relatively singular answers to life's questions rather than as a set of interrelated conversations which do not allow as much coherence as he seems to want to force on the subject matter. It is at this point that I think he has sacrificed too much to achieve the narrative coherency he wants.

In line with a neo-Barthian theological agenda, various assumptions seem to permeate the book that are troubling to me as I try to think theologically at the beginning of the 21st century. First, the book is dreadfully Eurocentric. When non-Western traditions are quoted, in good Barthian fashion they are treated as "taillights" illuminated by the "headlights" of Christianity. In a world where the majority of Christians now live south of the equator and where syncretistic Christian spin-offs are increasingly the norm, I wonder how convincing this hardline demarcation of Christian identity is. Second, McGrath seems to engage in dialogue with other sources of insight in the West, particularly the natural sciences, but the portraits are strangely one-sided. Science routinely fails adequately to explain life and Christianity routinely seems to rise to the occasion. Thus, a subtle host-guest mentality invades the dialogue where the power differential clearly falls on the side of Christianity, and science must content itself with making interesting observations destined to be subsumed under Christian categories. Again, I believe a more sophisticated set of relationships is better attuned to the times. Third, McGrath rather blithely buys into metaphysical dualism in two different ways. He suggests, for example, that "we are not at home" in the world and that our true place is "beyond." Furthermore, he seems to extend the fall to the whole of creation where death, predation, and struggle are part of what is "wrong" with the world. He posits the hope for a world beyond all such phenomena at the end of time. Again, these are certainly historically available options within the Christian tradition, but they are not *the only* Christian options, nor, it seems to me, are they even the most attractive ones for a world in the midst of a full blown environmental crisis.

I would recommend this book, then, to people making their first ventures into Christian theology, but I would want also to see it contextualized within the more complicated

cultural world that we inhabit. Pluralism is too pervasive a reality that we can hope to speak with one voice any more. Barthianism as a theological orientation seems strangely dated in this day and age, almost antiquated, I would venture to say. We have become too aware of the limits of human truth speaking to return to this theological stance.

(This is a section added to the review to address it to people preparing for ministry. Don Luck wanted this part added and to run it in the Trinity Journal)

So why does McGrath write Christian theology in this manner? And is this mode of discourse best attuned to our times as we seek to bring the Christian witness to the world? First, the why. Perhaps it is too much to ask of an introductory text that it evidence more sophistication about social location and religious epistemology. Nevertheless, the cultural context in which we theologize literally shimmers with postmodern nuance. Even untrained Christian thinkers understand the constructedness of Christian claims in the midst of a welter of competing claims. Moreover, few Christians can afford to be as arrogant as McGrath sounds in relation to other religious traditions. "The Other" is now our neighbor, our friend, our spouse, our children, our teacher. It is no longer our job to convert the other to support our own epistemological security. In Bonhoeffer's sense of religionless Christianity, it is now time to serve Christ by being open to the invitation of "others," to listen to God's call in their claims.

As an historian of Christianity, McGrath is clear about the theological option I describe above. After all, it flows rather directly from the historical consciousness of the 19th century. Yet he rejects it and opts for a kind of self-contained confessionalism. For example, in his chapter on suffering he lapses into assertions without warrants and circular theological reasoning that calls out for challenge. He argues "if nature is just an accident, the result of blind natural forces, we should not be unduly disturbed by the presence of pain and suffering. It would just be the inevitable outcome of a pointless world, yet another meaningless aspect of a meaningless world." We might ask if our only choice is between absolute meaningfulness and absolute meaninglessness, as he seems to suggest. Or we might ask what he means by such conceptions as "accident," "blind," "inevitability," or "pointlessness,"

words which call out for clarification, and which, of course, are chosen as polar opposites to the providentialism he wants to lead his reader to accept. The circularity of his constructive religious view appears when he offers his warrant for his theology, namely, "For the Christian, this makes sense." (p. 94) In effect, he argues that fully to comprehend Christian claims, one must be a participant in the cultural-linguistic world of the Christian (ala Lindbeck). In other words, to know it, one has to believe it, and only by believing it, can one know it. Such strategies have been on the rise since the late 20th century because Christians believe that postmodern epistemologies no longer require accountability across cultural-linguistic boundaries.

Now the what. What I would prefer to see in contemporary theology is a growing awareness of the relativity of Christian claims. Such awareness will ask of Christians that they engage and feel encumbered by the relative truth claims of "the other" even as they seek to enrich their religious experiences and theologies within their own Christian communities. In H. Richard Niebuhr's still useful phrasing, we are called to respond to all things as if we are responding to God's actions upon us. Cultural-linguistic relativity does not justify theological isolationism. Far from it, it necessitates Christian engagement. Christians must come to hear their voice as simply one among many voices. It is not the voice that silences the falsehoods of "the Other." It is not the witness that must keep "the heathen" in check. It is not the only path to communion with divine, even if it is our way of communing with God. Exclusivity needs to be a thing of the past. This, I believe, is the cultural setting in which we do find ourselves. It would be a poor service to future church folk - both lay and ordained - to train them in an overly simplistic picture of our cultural landscape. Moreover, with the rise of fundamentalisms of many different stripes - Christian and Muslim - to name the two most recently in the news, do we really need a Christian theology so convinced of its rectitude and interpretive adequacy? With attitudes that paint the world in black and white colors coming from all angles in American society - Christian America dedicated to freedom vs. Muslim Middle East dedicated to terrorism - is it not morally questionable to contribute to that mode of thinking?

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